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ABSTRACT

The perceived problems of college students' writing and possible ways to improve college writing instruction are the topics of these radio transcripts. In the first script, parents, teachers, and students comment on the state of writing in college. Professionals are interviewed who comment on the difference between oral and written English, the emphasis on clarity, the need for revision, computer analysis of writing as a way to analyze papers, and new ways to teach sentence parts. The second transcript focuses on the value of writing in the world of work. Emphasis is given to discussing technical writing required of engineers and business people and the merits of technical writing classes versus classes emphasizing the humanities. (MKM)

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OPTIONS IN EDUCATION
takes listeners to the core of the issues

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COLLEGE WRITING, PARTS I & II, PROGRAM NOS. 266-267

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OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

"COLLEGE WRITING, PART ONE"

REINHARDT: Can you describe what it's like for you -- how you're feeling when you sit down to write? For an assignment, or for anything.

STUDENT: Confused -- real confused, which way to go or where to start. They give us these subjects to write; a persuasive paper or a cause and effect paper, and I just sit down, like; "How do you do this?", you know? I just draw a blank. And I could do a paper for three hours, and not write 100 words.

REINHARDT: Not only does that college freshman have trouble getting started on his writing assignments. What he finally does write isn't very clear or well organized.

MERROW: He's not alone. Many of this year's four and a half million freshmen don't know a subject from a verb -- let alone how to make a point and develop it.

REINHARDT: If students don't learn to write critically, will they learn to think critically? I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow -- for NPR's "OPTIONS IN EDUCATION". Colleges are caught between high school graduates who lack basic writing skills, and a job market which demands those skills. In this program, how colleges are responding.

REINHARDT: Any college writing teacher can give you example after example of the problem.

TEACHER CITING COMMON PROBLEM

TEACHER: Well, I had a student a couple of weeks ago who, in describing an experience she had had over Christmas vacation, which she thought had helped her grow into a more mature person, finished her paper with the sentence, "I had experienced a growth in my brain". So I was forced to ask her, you know, had she had brain surgery to have this removed, or what the problem was; that students aren't sensitive to problems of idiom.

MERROW: The reason most often given for students' writing difficulties is television -- too much of it.

REINHARDT: Time spent watching TV is time lost from activities which require more rigorous thinking -- like reading.

A MOTHER'S COMPLAINT

MOTHER: My daughter -- the one who is a freshman in college now -- if I think about what she's read and what I had read at her age; I'm sure I've read, really, literally hundreds more books than she's read. I mean, you could -- she could probably name the books that she'd read, except for after childhood, when we read to her, and you know, she read sort of a lot of books when she was very small. But after that -- I don't know, a few a year.

MERROW: She teaches writing at Scripps College in California.

STANHOPE: There was a time when you could be fairly certain that students would have read "The Catcher in the Rye", and perhaps "Huckleberry Finn", and perhaps a few other of the kind of standard books.

MERROW: Jane Stanhope, Director of Composition and Reading at the American University, in Washington, D.C.

STANHOPE: And the last reading experience that they'd had in common were the Dr. Zeuss books, which is pretty frightening -- because most of those are pre-school books. Now they've all read some things, but they have not had a common body of reading experiences.

REINHARDT: Well, of course, what everybody says is it's television. Is that what it is?

STANHOPE: I think television certainly is a large element -- but it also reflects what their parents do. Many parents don't read very much, either, and they've had fairly full lives in terms of having traveled; they certainly are privileged students in the sense that they have most of the things that affluence provides -- orthidenture is fairly common, they have all gone to summer camps; they've done many things -- this is not the product of under-privilege, this is a product of the way in which their parents live, to some degree.

REINHARDT: What's happened to our society, that we don't read?

STANHOPE: Reading is work. We tend to, I think, go toward the passive kinds of entertainment; things where you don't have to do very much. You just sit back and let it come to you, which I think is more reflective of, or reflects more of what the situation is than just television, per se.

REINHARDT: Also, automobiles.

STANHOPE: Automobiles. Some children become readers because they are bored. These children don't have the opportunity to become bored because they've had tennis lessons, they have highly planned entertainments of one kind or another, and they are not left alone for long periods of time -- which is when many of us became readers. You read because there's nothing better to do, and then you discover something wonderful. And they haven't had that particular experience.

REINHARDT How is it that reading and writing are so entangled?

STANHOPE: Well, we learn our feeling for writing through reading. That's the way our vocabulary grows, that's the way our sense of what looks like a paragraph or a sentence is frequently established; not through formal classroom instruction. A lot of it is learned, simply by imitation of what we've read.

REINHARDT: But if you can speak, can't you write?

STANHOPE: Most people don't speak in complete sentences. Speech patterns are somewhat different from the way in which one writes -- so it isn't necessarily true that a person who speaks will will write well. Generally, the person who speaks well has probably read some more than other people, but writing is somewhat different from speaking.

MERROW: Jane Stanhope, Director of Composition and Reading at the American University in Washington, D.C.

REINHARDT: It may not be surprising that young people don't read and write much at home -- but how much of it do they get at school?

MERROW: Most junior high and high school teachers avoid giving writing assignments. It takes a lot of time to grade all those themes; many English teachers were not taught how to teach writing -- and some are not comfortable writing themselves.

REINHARDT: We met college freshmen who said they hadn't had to write a paper since the sixth grade.

A COLLEGE FRESHMAN'S LAMENT

STUDENT: I think I was, like, gypped in high school. You know, I was never taught anything -- in my four years of English, I was never taught anything.

REINHARDT: What did you talk about? Did you talk about nouns and verbs and pronouns?

STUDENT: Every once in awhile. If we talked about it, I didn't really pay attention; it was so boring to me. You know, I didn't really have to pay attention. I got by. My grades weren't that low, they were, like, the high seventies in English.

REINHARDT: What did you talk about? Do you remember?

STUDENT: Literature.

REINHARDT: What books?

STUDENT: What ever books they made us read.

REINHARDT: Do you remember some of them?

STUDENT: "Billy Budd", "A Clockwork Orange" -- I don't know, I can't even remember. I never read that much.

REINHARDT: Did you not like it very well?

STUDENT: I don't like to read at all.

REINHARDT: How many books have you read since you were 12, do you think -- other than textbooks?

STUDENT: Well, whatever was required in class, but outside of that, I don't know; maybe on my own, my own reading, I must have read only like four books. I just lose interest. Sometimes, I guess if it's complicated, I won't understand it, but if I really sit down and read it, and you know, I end up reading it over and over and over again before it really sinks in, and I understand it after I read it.

MERROW: It wasn't until that student went to college that she was forced to confront her lack of experience in writing. To get in to the college, she had to take a six week, basic skills course.

REINHARDT: That required remedial courses -- just one of the ways in which colleges are responding to the problem.

MERROW: Many of them are reinstating the required freshman composition courses they dropped in the early seventies.

REINHARDT: Colleges whose freshman English courses include both literature and composition are now placing more emphasis on composition. Two-thirds of schools in a 1978 survey for the National Institute of Education say they've made that change.

MERROW: And -- they're changing the way they teach writing.

GENE HAMMOND, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

REINHARDT: If I had been a freshman in college 10 or 15 years ago, what would my composition course probably have been like?

HAMMOND: It probably would have been taught by a graduate student who was interested in pursuing a career in teaching literature, who was forced to teach writing instead, and who wasn't quite sure what to teach in a writing class -- but someone who admired the work of Melville or of Hawthorne or of Swift or of Shakespeare, or someone, and that person would have the students read passages from any of those authors, and then write something about those authors. And they'd repeat that six or seven times.

REINHARDT: What were some of the students' responses to that kind of assignment?

HAMMOND: Well, the students who were basically interested in literature liked it, and those kind of students often turned out to be English majors. Students who didn't like literature -- hated it -- and thought that they didn't know how to write if they didn't know how to interpret literature, because that was the only kind of writing that they were offered the opportunity to try.

MERROW: Gene Hammond of the University of Maryland. There, freshmen won't be asked to write about Shakespeare or Melville. Hammon has his students write on topics that require research and observation.

HAMMOND: If they research something, they're going to know more about it than the teacher does -- and I think that's very important, because if they write about something that the teacher knows more about; say, Shakespeare, the most they can hope to do is satisfy the teacher. But they can't teach the teacher anything, they can't really communicate anything. They can just display a quantity of their writing. But if they go and look at LIFE Magazine from 1942, the teacher hasn't seen that magazine before, and the teacher will be interested to see what LIFE Magazine had to say in 1942 -- and it leads to a real communication situation, where the student cares about what he's presenting and cares to present it well, and makes sure he's got enough specific details to interest the teacher.

REINHARDT: And if he doesn't present it well, the teacher won't understand at all what LIFE Magazine in 1942 was like.

HAMMOND: Exactly. A teacher could fill in knowledge about Shakespeare, and sometimes lets students off the hook with less good writing, because mentally, the teacher is completing all the things that the student hasn't completed.

REINHARDT: Can you give me an example of what are some of the kinds of writing that students come to the university with?

HAMMOND: Okay. This is a comparison contrast paper about mens' and womens' gymnastics, and the problem is the one that I talked about before, of generality. You never see the gymnast.

"The general notion of gymnastics brings to mind flips and swings on various apparatus. There exists various imposed requirements within mens' and womens' gymnastics which reflect the differences of these two sports."

REINHARDT: So it's about the difference between mens' and women's, right?

HAMMOND: Yes.

REINHARDT: Oh. Well, the first sentence didn't tell that.

HAMMOND: No, it didn't. Well, the first sentence wouldn't have to; we just expect that their topic, they get to their topic by the end of the first paragraph. He in fact, sticks it in the middle of the first paragraph, and confuses you with what he says before and after it. Okay, he continues:

"It is these requirements which make up the very essence, which separates mens' gymnastics from womens' gymnastics." I might just comment, that's almost exactly what he said in the sentence before. Although he has never said what the differences are. "... the differences are best realized when examining the difficult levels and the contexts of what makes up a gymnastic routine." Next paragraph. "The difficulty of womens' routine is set by a minimum requirement of one superior and two medium skills. Other skills are required for a routine, but they hold no difficulty value."

REINHARDT: What does that mean?

HAMMOND: That's my question to the reader -- or to the writer. This student -- his paper continues the same way all the way through. You don't get any specific details. The student obviously knows a lot about mens' and womens' gymnastics, but you never see a woman gymnast, you never see a man gymnast in the whole course of the paper.

REINHARDT: In your mind's eye, you mean.

HAMMOND: In your mind's eye, yeah. And he's written with so many abstract words, like, '... the difficulty sets a requirement between one superior and two medium skills' -- all those are abstract words, doing things to other abstract words, and it's hard for a reader to follow. I think it's the most common student problem.

REINHARDT: How do you work with a student -- how do you explain to a student who's written that what he's written?

HAMMOND: You say to him, "Why should I care about what you've written?" That's one thing. "I've not learned anything from you. You've thrown around some words like 'requirements' and 'difficulties', but I would like to know some more about mens' and womens' gymnastics; I didn't realize there was a difference between the judging, and you haven't told me anything that helps me out. It's your duty as a writer to do something that helps me out."

That's the first thing I would say to him. The second thing I would say to him is, "Go watch. If you watch mens' gymnastics for awhile, if you watch womens' gymnastics for awhile, you already have a framework for what you're going to talk about, but you'll see details that will support the ideas that you want to make, and if you watch for a couple of hours some afternoon, you'll be able to have the details that will make a good paper for you."

REINHARDT: Doesn't the student sometimes get upset and say, "You're attacking me; you're saying that I didn't even think or that I don't know what I'm talking about!"

HAMMOND: It's true! I don't mind attacking students. I suppose we might have sounded like we were molly coddling them earlier. It hurts for a couple of days, but you learn by your mistakes, and I'd rather hurt them for a couple of days and make them realize that they have to do better.

REINHARDT: Gene Hammond, Director of freshmen English at the University of Maryland.

MERROW: Another surprise for many students is that even good writers have to revise their work.

STUDENT COMMENTS ON REVISIONS

STUDENT: I never knew was a revision was. We -- the only time in high school that I would have had to do a revision was if I had gotten an 'F' on a paper, or a 'D' -- and I never got D's or F's on my papers. I always got, you know, B's and A's, etc. And so I never knew was a revision was. Everything I handed in was good, and you know, I just left it that way.

MERROW: In fact, revision may be the most important part of writing. James Grey.

JAMES GREY

GREY: There was a time when I would have students write a paper every week, and that paper was written; it was never revised, because then I thought, "My God, if I ask them to revise, I'll be doubling that paper load, and I can barely keep up with this." And this was one class I was treating that way. I'm finding now that I'm requiring far fewer different assignment papers, but that each of them are done in drafts.

MERROW: But that's college. Could it be done in high school?

GREY: Oh, certainly. This could be done in junior high school, it can be done in upper grades. What we would want writers to do; we could start with third grade -- maybe earlier.

MERROW: So the key is, write and rewrite and revise and rethink.

GREY: And rethink, and make your whole rich, kind of experience about that whole thing. Pre-writing, what you do before the papers are written, or the kind of writing before the paper is submitted. But once submitted, the drafting that had gone up to that point, the revising. What revision really means. That's important.

Revision really does mean rethinking, reworking. Not correcting, not simply editing. And that all of that, obviously, is going to cut down on the number of assignments. But far better pieces of prose are coming out in this process.

MERROW: James Grey, of the Bay Area Writing Project in California.

REINHARDT: College writing teachers are taking new approaches to teaching even the most basic grammar.

CAROL COHAN, TEACHER

COHAN: When red comes before purple; what's your punctuation?

STUDENT: There is nothing -- you don't have to have any.

COHAN: Nothing. I'm not talking about a split, just plain red/purple.

STUDENT: Oh, okay.

COHAN: Okay? No comma. When purple comes before red, what's the punctuation rule?

STUDENT: Comma.

MERROW: Carol Cohan uses pieces of colored felt to teach sentence parts, and their relationship to each other.

REINHARDT: She and a lot more college teachers today take their students through the whole writing process -- from research to revision.

MERROW: Teachers are more inclined to act as editor, and not the Grammar God, who slashes the paper with red ink.

COHAN: You see? All right now, let's move on. Ken Harrison isn't a full human being. He feels useless and miserable because he is an invalid, and his life relies on a caphiter to keep him open. Well, is this why he feels useless and miserable?

STUDENT: It's not only that, I'm giving examples -- don't you want examples?

COHAN: Yeah, but as I recall the play, this isn't the critical reason. The critical reason is that he can't sculpt. If he could sculpt, and he had to use a caphiter, all right, it's not such a tragedy, right?

STUDENT: I go in to the next points. He ...

COHAN: You lost me. You lost your credibility as a writer.

STUDENT: That's the relevance.

COHAN: You see? You lost your credibility as a writer. Because I saw the play, too, and I see that the primary reason for his wanting to die is that he can't sculpt, and so he isn't feeling fulfilled any more.

STUDENT: I see what you're saying, uh huh.

COHAN: Uh huh? Moving on. His physical self is totally insensitive. Harrison has to rely on artificial machines to teach him to read and write again. Because of his distressing state, he is constantly using sarcastic humor which reflects -- wait a minute -- moving away from the point. What's your point? He is no longer a full human being. Don't move away from that. Anchor it. All of these things make him less than a full human being in his terms.

STUDENT: Well, I'm giving the details, I'm not giving the ...

COHAN: No, you're moving away. All right, you've given the details, you've given the details -- because he is in this distressing state, he is constantly using sarcastic humor, which reflects -- now you're moving away.

This is a new idea. What are you out to prove with this idea?

STUDENT: That he uses sarcastic humor to reflect his inner misery. Oh, I'm showing how he's affected, I'm showing how he's affected ...

COHAN: Next step in your thinking. He is less than a full human being. Being less than a full human being makes him miserable. That's the next step. Okay, you skipped over it. That's right -- and this is how you document that. You see? You skipped over that.

STUDENT: Uh huh. So all I need is, like, those main points to just develop each --

COHAN: You must see each main point, establish each main point explicitly, go back, and prove each main point. So here, because -- because Ken Harrison is less than a full human being, purple cause to implement the transition, that's what we were talking about in class today -- because Ken Harrison is less than a full human being, he is miserable.

STUDENT: Then I go on to say how it shows -- how he shows his misery.

COHAN: Now you got it.

STUDENT: Yeah.

COHAN: Okay, and where do you go next?

STUDENT: Okay. Then I tell about his sarcastic humor, which reflects it.

COHAN: That's right -- so that's proof of his misery.

STUDENT: Yeah; proof of his misery.

COHAN: And where do you go next?

STUDENT: Then you go on to the next point.

COHAN: What's the next point?

STUDENT: Why should he live in such conditions?

COHAN: Well, all right. Now you're opening a philosophical Pandora's Box, and now you've got to deal with this fundamental philosophical issue. Is life worth preserving at all costs, or is life only valuable if it's quality life, and what's quality life, and whose decision is it, and what about all of those people who say that euthanasia is illegal and immoral and unethical and all of that, and besides which, God doesn't like it? How are you going to deal with all of that? That's got to come in next, and once you resolve that -- you've got to show both sides of the argument, you've got to weigh your presentation, putting the negative in purple and the positive in red, so that you imbue your reader with the notion that euthanasia is all right under certain circumstances; establish those circumstances.

STUDENT: Okay.

COHAN: And then ray Ken Harrison fits into those circumstances; therefor -- logical next step -- he should be allowed to die.

STUDENT: I see. Uh ...

COHAN: You'll turn in an 'A' paper, won't you?

STUDENT: I'll try, I'll ...

COHAN: Yes, you will. I think you will.

STUDENT: I'll sit there for hours -- all right, you just wait. I'll just ...

COHAN: Well, if you hit a snag, give me a call. You can call me at home. I mean, everybody else is doing it, why don't you do it, too?

STUDENT: I'll get the number.

COHAN: Get it from Karen.

STUDENT: Thank you.

COHAN: You're welcome. Okay, don't be late for class.

STUDENT: Okay; thank you so much. I appreciate it, bye.

COHAN: All right.

MERROW: Carol Cohan, who teaches freshman writing at the American University in Washington, D.C.

REINHARDT: A one to one approach such as this one, which teaches clear thinking, as well as grammar, is time consuming.

RICHARD LANHAM, UCLA

LANHAM: When you've done an analysis of a student's paper, very often the student will say, "Oh, well, I didn't really say anything there, did I?" And this is after an hour, right? Of sentence by sentence revision. And then when the student has come to that conclusion himself or herself, then you say, "Right, my friend, I'm glad you noticed it. Now back to the drawing board, to go have an idea." And then they have an idea and they come back in, and it usually takes two or three hours, at least, of office hour consultation in order to really show the student how what he says and what he thinks are part of the same kind of problem.

And, if you teach a large class, if you lecture 70 students, and you'd like to spend three additional hours in office hours with each of those students, you don't have 200 hours in your quarter. But the machine does. And if we can get it to do some things, at least, we're way ahead.

REINHARDT: The "machine" Richard Lanham is talking about is a computer. Students in his writing program at UCLA feed their rough drafts into the computer, which checks for common grammatical mistakes.

MERROW: Run on sentences, long strings of prepositional phrases, double negatives, sentence fragments.

LANHAM: The students love it. In the first place, it's impersonal; it doesn't embarrass them by their mistakes. In the second place, it's baloney proof. They can't say, "Ah, you just don't like my style", you know, they don't bother to tell the computer about how Aunt Ethel broke her leg, it obviously won't wash; the computer doesn't know this. The computer is programmed with a pleasant, cheerful personality, which is sort of fun. But also, students are much brighter than people of my generation. They know that the

computer is the true function now -- especially students in the natural sciences. They go to an English course, they hate it right away. They don't like it, they don't like English, they've always gotten bad grades, and then you say, "Well, sit down at the computer terminal." "Aha, oh, well, that's really what it's all about!"

And so we've had phenomenal luck with the sections of the freshmen course which were composed very largely of students in the sciences who'd flunked the course at least once -- and once they got the computer, you just couldn't tear them away.

REINHARDT: Can you give an example of a sentence or a paragraph, with errors in it that the computer would pick up, and what it would say?

LANHAM: Well, we can look at the printout, and let's see if we can find something. Well, you can see here -- we have a map of the 'to be' verbs and of the prepositions, the relationships of those to it is a very important part of my revising prose point, so you have in this passage, it's all plotted out, and on the right margin you're given a readout of all the occurrences and when they occur. Then the computer -- the density is such that the computer comes on with instructions saying, "Watch out!" You might be writing overly convoluted sentences; watch the prepositions and/or infinitives, you overindulge. I find too many 'to be' verbs extremely boring. Check your spelling. This happens to be a particularly dense and impossible passage coming from a UCLA administrator, and so the computer gets even madder, and says what a horrid mess.

Then, one of the things it reads for is sentence length, the various sentences, so you just have a little map there, and it tells you here that it's not really so bad except that the sentences are pretty long. That's a gasp, for example -- a disaster. So you've got to do something about that. Then, the use of prepositions, it tells you, there's a list of all the ones that are used and when and why. Another thing students do is continually use the passive voice, where the active would be much better. So we do a readout on that. And then the student, having got this readout, goes back to his paper and does all those changes. And after he reaches a certain point, then the computer says, "Okay". This one, in fact, says, "Go, be blessed and sin no more" but it can say something else, in some other kind of language.

It's being revised. Our programmer in the office is working on this now -- this is a very early version. And ...

REINHARDT: So you would hope eventually that in your writing courses that every paper, before it's turned in, will go through this program. Is that correct now?

LANHAM: Absolutely, yes. If we could save -- if the early figure of saving 15% of the instructor's time were applied simply to the number of TA's in the regular freshman program at UCLA, we'd save about $65,000 in one year, from that one saving alone.

REINHARDT: Richard Lanham of UCLA's writing program, interviewed for OPTIONS IN EDUCATION by Chris Lauderback.

MERROW: Computers alone won't improve the quality of college writing. Writing teachers must be trained and nurtured. They haven't always been.

MORE FROM GENE HAMMOND

HAMMOND: Most topics should allow for some research and some sorting of evidence.

REINHARDT: Gene Hammond coaches freshman writing teachers at the University

of Maryland.

HAMMOND: ... could be interviewing people, could be discussion ahead of time, but somehow, students should be looking through material, sorting it out, before they present it to you. Don't let them write off the top of their head. All you're asking for is just a rough draft.

REINHARDT: Next on OPTIONS IN EDUCATION -- what happens to students who are almost through college, and still can't write?

HAMMOND: Try to teach inductively. And the words 'inductive' and 'deductive' are thrown around in very loose ways. But I hope I can justify this one. What I mean by this is to let students try something first before you explain it to them. In the same way, in a very small way that I had you right through the stages of your writing process before I told you how important it is to think about that when you're teaching. Try to do the same thing with the students.

If you're teaching gerunds, you can put a sign on the board that says, "_____ing is no fun any more" -- and then have them fill in the blank. And you can get 5,6,7,8,9,10 suggestions as to what would fit into that blank. All those suggestions are going to be gerunds, it'll be fun for them to think of the possibilities, and at the end you can say, "See this form where the word ends -- it's a verb that you've given me, it ends in 'ing' and it comes as the subject of a sentence? That's a gerund."

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MERROW: And please, tell us the call letters of your own local NPR station.

GENE HAMMOND - CLOSING

HAMMOND: Thesis statement is one of the centers of a course in writing. You tell them from the beginning, okay, you have to have a thesis statement in every paper, or could you risk trying to ask them -- what do you know about thesis statements? Have them write a paragraph about what they know about thesis statements and how important they think that they are. You just collect those papers, look at them and see what they say, and half the class will have said what you would have said about thesis statements anyway. The other class will be impressed that the other half knew it and they didn't, and they will pay attention.

Just another example of how, by letting them try something first, you can get things taught a lot more effectively than by starting out and telling them yourself.

REINHARDT: OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University.

MERROW: Support for the series is provided by the National Institute of Education, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

REINHARDT: OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is written and produced by John Merrow. Mary Rouse is our Associate Producer, and Rebecca Goldfield is our Assistant Producer, with engineering assistance by Gary Fink.

MERROW: Some of the material for this program came from Chris Lauderback in Los Angeles.

REINHARDT: I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow ... and this is NPR. National Public Radio.

Program No. 267: "COLLEGE WRITING, TWO"

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OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

"COLLEGE WRITING, PART TWO"

TEACHER: "The worth, or long standing value of a given piece of written work is often determined as a result of the credibility and esteem judged characteristic of its author. Inscrutinously examined ..."

MERROW: Can you understand what all that means?

REINHARDT: The college teacher you heard reading that student's essay says incomprehensible, boring writing like that is common among her students.

MERROW: Even among honor students, like the senior who wrote that essay.

REINHARDT: In fact, for several years, corporations have been complaining that college graduates they hire as managerial trainees can't write. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow -- for NPR's OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, with the second part of our report on the poor quality of college writing, and what colleges are doing about it.

STUDENT: I'd rather sit down and talk to somebody than sit down and write them a letter. If I want to talk to them, I'll call them. I just don't like to write.

TEACHER: Nowadays, they want even Shakespeare done in comic book form. And that is a destruction in which I will not participate.

STUDENT: Like, when you're writing, it's really a thought that counts. It really is a thought that counts. Some writers just write, and what they write is not even corrected yet. They just take a thought and they bring it to a publisher, an editor, and they do all the grammatical errors and all of that stuff.

REINHARDT: In Part One, we reported that many colleges are reinstating the required freshman writing courses they dropped in the early seventies.

MERROW: But that's not all they're doing. More colleges these days have writing labs, where students can come for help with assignments.

REINHARDT: Some are encouraging teachers in other subject areas to grade papers for writing, as well as content.

MERROW: Many colleges are beefing up their advanced composition courses, making them more relevant to the kinds of writing students will do in their careers.

REINHARDT: Technical writing, professional writing, advanced functional writing. Those are the course titles.

MERROW: Students in the courses learn how to write proposals, reports, memos -- the kinds of papers they'll have to write on the job.

REINHARDT: The kinds of papers that are meant to result in action.

John Muller and Elizabeth Taboh, both technical writing teachers.

JOHN MULLER AND ELIZABETH TABOH

MULLER: If you are a technical writer, I don't care how you feel about the topic; I only care about the effect of your writing on the audience. If the audience doesn't understand it, you have no excuse. In almost every other kind of writing, you can claim the audience was ignorant, the audience was uninterested, the audience was this or that. And I would say to you, "You and only you have the responsibility for 100% comprehension on the part of your audience." You'd say that's impossible; I'd say, "Nevertheless, that's your task."

To use a literary example, in Moby Dick, Melville talks about the equipment used to hunt whales. Is that technical writing? Well, in another context, it might be. The fact is that he's using these technical images as symbols for other things -- and the degree to which they are symbols, the writing is not technical. To the degree to which they are pure referenced, that they point to things and enable successful action in the world -- that's technical writing.

MERROW: Why is this distinction important? It strikes me as trivial.

MULLER: That's a tough question, but to start off with, the role of most of -- the role as seen by most of the people in that business is humanistic; it's a liberal arts activity. When I taught literature, I was concerned with the definition of quality. Now, quality is different to every person that considers it. A work of art, a work of literary art, is never exhausted by any single explication -- by your examination or my examination, or even my examination today. I can teach every day and find new and marvelous things, because I am a different person.

Technical writing is diametrically opposite to that. My purpose when I create a piece of technical communication is to predict absolutely the behavior of my audience. So if I tell them how to make a good tape recording, how to operate a nuclear reactor; how to do anything -- that behavior that I predict will occur, and so, really, the definition of quality in technical writing is just a function between my prediction and my observation. That means that I've got a laboratory the size of the world to test my materials, to test my theories. And so I'm pretty cavalier about my theories. I mean, I have no vested interest at all. I hypothesize, I formulate, I test, I modify -- constantly. If I'm teaching the difference between Jane Austin and George Elliott as 19th Century novelists, there is no laboratory. We can quibble delightfully; maybe even productively -- forever, on that topic.

MERROW: How about poetry? Could you argue that poetry is technical writing? The poet has a set of images, that he or she wants the audience to perceive?

MULLER: I have never known a poet in my life that would accept the notion that I understood completely and finally; in other words, that I could exhaust that poem. The primary distinguishing characteristic of a piece of poetry, to me, is the fact that it has unlimited potential, that the ambiguity of the words is such that it changes from day to day, from audience to audience. Ambiguity has no place in technical writing.

TABOH: Right. What we're trying to do is in code a message in words,

so that when the reader decodes it, he has the same ideas that the writer had. And if that happens, then it's successful writing. It doesn't have to be beautiful, and the structure may be contrary to what we've all been taught as acceptable structure. But if the reader understands what the writer intended, then it's successful communication. And there is no room for ambiguity; we don't want double meaning or triple meaning. And sentences that can be read two or three ways are out, and that's why we still have to push grammar, usage and punctuation, and the basic rules of language -- to try to control the language better.

MERROW: So if I sat down with my writing class and said, "Okay, I'd like you to write me a piece today telling me exactly how to get from here to the post office, so that I could read this piece of paper and get to the post office."

MULLER: You got it. Right. Okay.

MERROW: Okay. Then my bet would be that most of the students in the class would not do it correctly.

MULLER: No.

TABOH: No.

MULLER: You're absolutely right. In fact, that's one of my favorite examples, when someone says, "What's technical writing?" I say I like to divide it into two categories. Let's talk about clarity and then credibility. A clear set of instructions on how to get from here to San Francisco -- I use that instead of the post office, I'd rather go there -- a clear set of instructions on how to get to San Francisco would result in success on the part of any reader, any reader. If they get there, my writing is good; if they don't, my writing is bad.

Another analogy, if you will -- if I were to defend your life at a trial, and utter the most eloquent, Ciceronian speech ever heard, destined to be anthologized in perpetuity, and you're hung, it's not a very good speech. She might think it's beautiful. But you don't.

MERROW: Uh huh.

MULLER: Now that's the clarity part of technical writing. There is another part that is a little more difficult to nail down, and that's the credibility part. Not only do the instructions have to enable you to take successful action, but they have to generate in you enough trust in that instruction that you'd be willing to take a chance, to try it.

TABOH: If a set of instructions looks bad, it's crammed on the page, if the specific steps are not separated and numbered, if it doesn't have good visual appeal, if it doesn't have illustrations -- then you look at it and you think, "I'll put it together myself and I won't look at the instructions." So -- whether or not it has credibility depends almost immediately on the visual appeal.

MULLER: Right, right.

TABOH: If it doesn't generate visual appeal, then you're not even going to read it.

REINHARDT: Elizabeth Taboh and John Muller -- teachers of technical writing at the Universities of Houston and Minnesota, respectively.

MERROW: Technical or professional writing courses are usually offered to juniors or seniors. By the third year in college, a student is likely to know what job he wants.

REINHARDT: He's also more likely to realize he may have to write in that job, and lots of jobs require writing -- even engineering.

PAT WALSH, FORMER ENGINEER

WALSH: Well, there are things like engineering change requests. Any time you want to change anything, you have to write an engineering change request. There are new product 1482's that have to be filled out every, you know, every year, you have product changes, you've got to write some paperwork to describe what those changes are, there's drafting work orders that you write to your draftsman, instructions on what he's got to do. I mean, you're gonna talk to him later, but still, the initial paperwork has to be generated. There's test requests, there's test reports, there's reports on the status of ongoing projects, justification of past decisions, reports for appropriations, requests for monies, state of the art reports, presentations to upper management on new product lines, presentations to sales, to dealerships, to service managers, to fleet owners, and letters to elicit some kind of a response from support divisions.

So, there just is a whole lot of paperwork, and that's an inescapable fact of life in a corporation. And if an engineer can't write, a large part of his workload then, is going to become despicable to him, instead of challenging or creative or an opportunity. And what happens is that he's gonna get burned by the system, he's gonna acquire a reputation for fumbling with the ball instead of being able to run with it, because he's going to hesitate, really, to do his work; it's sort of like having a creative gift exceeded only by one's capacity for self destruction, if you're not going to communicate well.

MERROW: Pat Walsh -- until recently, an engineer at General Motors.

REINHARDT: At her alma mater, the University of Michigan's College of Engineering, 80% of seniors take a technical writing seminar. They've been convinced of an engineer's need for writing by professionals like Pat Walsh and teachers -- like J.C. Mathes.

MERROW: One of Mathes' techniques is showing students what can happen when an engineer writes poorly.

REINHARDT: His best example is a memo written before the near meltdown at the nuclear power plant on Three Mile Island.

J.C. MATHES

MATHES: This memo actually did go to the important audiences, but it was so poorly designed, that they didn't realize that it was meant for them, and they had to act.

GROFSOREAN: It wasn't persuasive.

MATHES: It was not persuasively designed. The writer didn't think in terms of persuasion. He thought he was transferring information, and his primary -- the manager who received it testified that he glanced at it and picked out two items mentioned in the memo which were not what he was supposed

to pick up. It was designed -- it led his mind, in his eye, to two points and, in his mind, all it was was a request for further evaluation. He didn't even respond to the sentence in the memo that says, "The references suggest the possibility of uncovering the core if present high pressure injection policies continue." And this went right over his head.

GROFSOREAN: And we're looking at this report -- both of us -- and that is at the bottom of the report.

MATHES: That is at the bottom of the report, after some particular information above, after some references to previous reports, and it's buried in the last paragraph in such a way that a busy person in an office in industry would not necessarily respond -- and indeed, this man did not respond.

GROFSOREAN: How would you write this memo differently?

MATHES: I would urge any writer in industry to start off with the important point. There is a possibility that if we do not change our procedure, the core will be uncovered. Then proceed to the questions that need to be evaluated. Now -- we can't change our procedure until we determine whether or not the damage to the valves or pipes that have been suggested would occur. But let's get to the purpose. Action is needed -- not further investigation.

GROFSOREAN: And the action statement goes right to the top.

MATHES: The action statement in any report should be right at the top; it should be in the subject line, and then in the first paragraph -- the first statement that the audience, the reader, gets should l -- that statement should alert that reader that action is needed, and what action is needed.

REINHARDT: J.C. Mathes, humanities professor at the College of Engineering, the University of Michigan. Interviewed for OPTIONS IN EDUCATION by Michael Grofsorean of WUOM, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

MERROW: What really attracts students to technical or professional writing courses, however, is not a desire to save humanity -- but something much more practical.

RICHARD LANHAM, UCLA

LANHAM: What we do is put the writing instruction between the student and the money tree. He wants to get there, he wants to become a doctor, a lawyer, or whatever. So these are things that he's immediately interested to. There is no question about it -- the closer you get to a student's immediate concerns, whatever they are, doesn't matter. The easier it is to teach them how to write --and this doesn't trouble me at all because the basic act of composition is to make people self concious about language.

REINHARDT: Richard Lanham, of UCLA's writing program.

MERROW: Even simple memos to your boss need to be clear and concise. If they're not, the effect may be the opposite of what you wanted. Michael Marcuse of the University of Maryland.

MICHAEL MARCUSE, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

MARCUSE: What's the point? That'd be the thing that the boss would

ask -- and if he couldn't figure out fairly quickly what the point was, he'd assume that his subordinate was a ninny. That's the effect.

I mean, the boss needs to -- not only the boss, but anyone who is using my writing in order to do their job, needs to know what they need to know from me so they can get on with the job, and if someone has to wade through this whole page in order to get four pieces of information, it's gonna make them unhappy. It would make me unhappy if I'm trying to do my job, and I need four pieces of information, and I have to wade through a whole page of talk before I get to it.

REINHARDT: Is your impression that this kind of writing is in fact going on in businesses across the country?

MARCUSE: Oh, of course. Yeah, yeah -- though I think, you know, it depends. It's certainly not going on in the most successful corridors of business; that is, one of the things that I've noticed in my own experience out in government and I think the business world can't be different, is that advancement very quickly becomes a matter of ability to communicate, both in speech and in writing, and if my student were going to write memos like this, he would remain in an entry level position for a very long time.

REINHARDT: Are you really saying that advancement is essentially, how you write, rather than how you think?

MARCUSE: Well, it seems to me that writing and thinking can't finally be distinguished; the distinction that you get is that some people can't write, their writing is not developed to the point where they feel it's an adequate expression of their thought. But if someone is writing well, and their writing has become a reliable faculty that they have, then it is a way of expressing one's thoughts, and I would say that, you know, at least the people in the highest positions were always those who were good writers, and people who were poor writers were never in high positions.

REINHARDT: Michael Marcuse, writing professor at the University of Maryland.

MERROW: Marcuse is Director of what may be the first junior level writing course to be required of all undergraduates.

REINHARDT: The course, emphasizing writing skills needed on the job, is being taught by not only English professors, but also, professors in other subject areas -- and professionals from the community. John Auchard.

JOHN AUCHARD, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

AUCHARD: Now, the interesting thing about this course is that you are not going to have 20 students, all of whom have the same background in physics. You'll have students in that class that have a background in botany, a background in English, a background in history, political science and all the disciplines. It's an attempt to force students to abandon their jargon, abandon their in house vocabularies and in house cliches, and to communicate the important issues to people in other disciplines. And so when those papers are read out in class, and if a word is used that puzzles the English student, he'll raise his hand and ask what it means -- and if a student in English is giving a paper, perhaps on developments in modern drama and he mentions some terms that mean nothing to the botany student, the student will raise his hand.

This is aimed at giving the student a great deal of flexibility. We're not trying to teach students that there is never, ever an objective of writing for your professional peers. But we want students to recognize when they are writing for the expert and when they are writing for the general audience.

REINHARDT: You're talking about how the student will use this when he's in his job. Does that mean that what we're really doing now in this advanced composition course is training people for work?

AUCHARD: Well, I think that one of the big problems we have with composition -- particularly freshman composition, which is where my background was -- is that students have very little motivation to write. We have found increasingly that students have a terriffic orientation to the job. At the school I came from, we had -- I think -- about four sections of business writing two years ago. Now I believe we have about 20. I think teachers felt very frustrated in the English departments, being forced into teaching resume writing and just cover letter writing, and talking about business problems. I suppose, we are using this course in a way, to make the students think about their own lives; where they're heading, where they're going -- and they're interested in that, and they have a real motivation in that.

It's something of a carrot to them, to think that we hold before them that this can all be used one day.

REINHARDT: Do you see what seems to be going by the way, is the reading of Milton or the reading of Shakespeare, and then looking at those to see, you know -- writing about those.

AUCHARD: I think that we like to think about this program as not substituting for those courses, but in addition to those courses.

REINHARDT: But of course, this is required and the other isn't.

AUCHARD: Well, that's right. I like to think of this as a humanistic course, and a humanistic course because I see too many students in every division writing to some theoretical listener in the sky, someone very difficult to impress, a creature of their imagination. I would like students to learn to write for people -- people who share their interests, who share different interests, and I think a course, we're bringing up issues that begin to join the two cultures, the culture of the sciences and the humanities. We're bringing those students together. I do not see it as a mean or a grotesquely practical course; I see it as a course that is trying to join two essential halves of our culture and the university together.

MERROW: John Auchard, of the University of Maryland. That debate, whether job oriented technical writing is mean and practical, and therefore, inappropriate for the campus, is going on at many colleges and universities.

REINHARDT: For poet John Ciardi, there is no debate. He says students should learn writing not by looking ahead to their jobs, but by looking back at what has gone before them.

JOHN CIARDI

CIARDI: I believe very strongly in the Maiestro's Workshop; years ago in the Renaissance, for example, if one wanted to be a painter, he became an apprentice in the workshop of a master, and he, by God, did what the master told him to do and there was no discussion about it. I will not democratize education out of existence. I am of the -- we're all ignorant; it's a question of being what subject is being discussed.

REINHARDT: What would you have them read, and then how would you have them write?

CIARDI: Well, it would depend on the time and what was permissable. But I think, certainly, one should read Homer, Plato, Sophacles, Virgil, Dante, Chauccer, Faustus, maybe -- not in the original, that's asking too much, and I couldn't myself make it in the original in all of them. Shakesepare, John Dunn, and now you have heard the masters of language. And the masters of concept. And once you have those in mind, you have a foundation on which to build. But nowadays, they want even Shakespeare done in comic book form, and that is a destruction in which I will not participate.

MERROW: John Ciardi, poet, author, and former college teacher.

REINHARDT: Michael Marcuse has stayed in teaching.

MORE WITH MICHAEL MARCUSE

MARCUSE: It is unfortunate that we're working at this level at this stage in a student's intellectual development. But the fact of the matter is that we're doing that, and to pretend, as English teachers have done in the past, that the problem is not there -- or, to state that the problem is there and ought to be solved in the public schools, and therefore, we're not going to do anything about it, doesn't solve the problem, so it seems to me that what we do is to attempt to solve the problem. Now, I would hope very much that somewhere down the line, the junior composition program would become unnecessary; indeed, that freshman composition would be unnecessary. Harvard has just had to reverse itself also; freshman composition was gotten rid of on the grounds that anyone who was accepted to Harvard didn't need freshman composition -- they had already gotten their training in composition as high school students. They've now had to reinstitute a freshman writing requirement.

I do think there is one reason, or at least one reason, why it may be that we have to have writing courses as a part of the formal curriculum in universities now, in 1980. Our students live in an oral, oral culture. They don't read a great deal as a part of their lives. They watch a lot of television, they listen to a lot of mucic; they don't do a lot of reading or writing, and therefore, I think that reading or writing becomes special in a way that perhaps they weren't in 1920, or in 1880 -- they're special activities that need to be specially encouraged. And so I think we probably will find that some courses will be needed in any case. But I hope, for example, that reading and writing eventually can be part of, simply, every course that a student takes at the university and not be particularly associated with one special course or another.

REINHARDT: Michael Marcuse of the University of Maryland.

MERROW: Not everyone is apologetic about the trend toward teaching job related writing skills. John Muller says he teaches rigorous thinking -- and love of language -- in his technical writing course.

JOHN MULLER, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

MULLER: What I like to push is -- and not to sound pompous -- an architectonic notion, that every sentence is constructed out of certain notions; verbs, whatever, subjects -- and that your arrangement, the arrangement of the words changes the perception of your audience. And certainly, in a language as rich as English, you have many nouns, many synonyms, many verbs, more or less

precise, that you can choose -- and I try to make my writers as self concious as possible. Now, that would sound very different from what I hear in most composition classes or high schools, where they're trying to destroy that self conciousness, and let them emote a little more freely. I don't want that; I want decisions, I want them to be able to tell me in every case why they made a decision to use that verb and put it in that position.

MERROW: I can see why people who are not -- and do what you call technical writing -- would be very upset.

MULLER: Oh, yes.

MERROW: You don't think that the poet works on nuance, works on putting words in the right order, works on picking exactly the right word? That's what you're suggesting.

MULLER: Oh, of course -- and, all right, at the risk of sounding as if I'm contradicting myself, when a technical writer is doing the most important thing that he or she could do, the task is more similar to what a poet does in just the situation you've described. You sit there, you contemplate the reality out in the world, unnamed, unsybolized, and you search for that correct formulation, that correct word, and you seize on it. Now -- the difference there, however, is almost always in ambiguity, in levels of meaning, where the technical communicator is trying to be unmistakably clear. The poet -- the poet is almost always trying to give as much richness as possible.

REINHARDT: John Muller, technical writing teacher at the University of Minnesota.

MERROW: It's just that richness -- that ambiguity -- that poet John Ciardi is afraid our society will lose.

MORE WITH JOHN CIARDI

CIARDI: What happens when a poet writes supremely well and no one recognizes how well he has done? Richard Wilbur has a poem about a new plant chute has just broken the ground, it has yet to define itself. You don't know whether it's going to be grass, a shrub, a tree or what; it's just that little green point sticking out of the ground. And he describes its lack of definition, and concludes, '... then reaches for the sky and starts to ramify." Now, 'ramify', I think is a magnificent word in this context. We all know what 'ramification' is -- it's a complexity. But how many hear at the root of the word, the Latin, 'ramos' -- branch? Because to ramify is to add branches, and in this context, what he has done is chosen a word in which the root sense chimes against the evolved sense. There's something like a whole sweetness, there's a thrill of pleasure in that for me, that I suppose I could find students who would know what I was talking about if I tried to make that point.

MERROW: John Ciardi, poet and author -- and former college teacher.

REINHARDT: A transcript of both parts of our report on college writing costs $2. The cassette recording costs $6.

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MERROW: Some of the material for this program came from Michael Grofsorean, Station WUOM, Ann Arbor, Michigan -- and Chris Lauderback in Los Angeles.

REINHARDT: I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

REINHARDT: This is NPR ..., National Public Radio.